Ending Slavery

Consumer action – video transcript

Today, we're going to be talking about another type of anti-slavery campaigning which has existed in the past and in the present. We're going to be talking about consumer boycotts and consumer action across history, as well as today. And I think the theme that we'll probably be exploring will be that of moral responsibility at a distance-- so slightly philosophical, but with very applied uses.

Clare, great to be here with you today.

Nice to see you, Kevin.

We're talking about consumption. We're talking about boycott. We're talking about how people dealt with the idea that they would often feel a moral responsibility for what was happening to people in slavery, sometimes far across on the other side of the world.

So one of the interesting questions there is why did people in Britain start to feel that they had some responsibility for things which were happening a long way away from Britain's shores in Britain's colonies, particularly in the Caribbean islands.

And that is a very important question. And it's one that's not been unpicked, I think, as well as it might have been within the historical, or even the philosophical literature. There is that work that discusses how a change in definition occurred across the population-- the one that refers to the idea that slavery at the beginning of the 18th century was often seen by a lot of the European populations as fundamentally being an economic question or an economic problem.

But then the beginnings of anti-slavery campaigners, particularly out of the churches, begin to say, no, this has to be defined as a moral question or a moral problem. And that begins to help people to see it in a completely different way-- so not just something that could be dealt with by governments and trade, but was something that, in fact, had to be answered within yourself as a moral question. Am I right in thinking that women were often the leaders in this new boycott and consumption campaign?

Yes, that's absolutely right. I think you could say one of the reasons was that women at that time were totally excluded from involvement in the political process. They didn't have the vote. They couldn't sign petitions.

So when the anti-slavery campaign started in the 1790s, the leading male campaigners very much focused on getting men to petition parliament. But then this whole area opened up where women saw that they could actually take a leading role because women were considered to be the ones who were responsible for household purchases. They were making the decisions, the consumption decisions, for the family.

Tell me more about that. I want to know about how did children get involved. What was the actual activity that women and children and men and people within the anti-slavery campaign were involved in?

Well, certainly by the 1820s, when the women had started to set up their own anti-slavery societies, women and children would go around house to house in cities calling on families. And they made a whole range of special little pamphlets targeted at different class groups that target women, children, men, urging them to not use slave-grown sugar.

And so children would be involved in that. And then also, there are some rather touching examples of letters where men describe how it was the children in the family giving up the use of sugar that actually inspired them. But there's no real evidence that it managed to completely reduce the use of slave-grown sugar.

And I think part of the problem was this sugar was kind of protected by the government policy. So it was cheaper to buy than sugar from other sources. It had protective duties on it.

That's interesting because there's a very interesting parallel there with what goes on today in the way the European Union, and particularly the North American governments, give vast subsidies to agriculture within their borders-- subsidies that are so large that they create an almost inability to compete, even by farmers in the developing world who operate at much, much lower profit levels and costs.

I was actually told by anti-slavery campaigners from both Haiti and West Africa when I asked them, what's the one thing the United States government might do to help you end slavery in your countries-- and they had never met each other-- they said to me in unison, end the subsidies on rice, which surprised me because I didn't understand it at the time.

But they said these vast subsidies by governments had, in fact, created the context in which hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people who grew rice, little farmers, couldn't compete with vast bags of rice which flowed in particularly from the United States. And they were just knocked out completely from the agricultural business, and ended up themselves being enslaved in that vulnerability.

Yeah. I think that has very interesting parallels. There with a lot of rhetoric going on about free trade. Britain tended to only like free trade when it benefited them.

And I wanted to ask about that-- about in particular as today, people say, well, what are my alternatives? If I don't want to buy a cell phone that has conflict minerals produced by slavery, what can I do because I must have a cell phone, the same one that we must have cocoa, we must have sugar, we must have our chocolate. What were the alternatives at that time?

Well, I think that's very interesting. You say you need to produce an alternative because when the campaign originally started, the boycott wasn't actually used at this time. So the term abstention was used.

It was started by Quakers, which I don't think is a coincidence because Quakers were very concerned about leading a fairly austere, everyday life and not dancing, not wearing fancy clothes, and so on. And so I think abstaining was about depriving yourself of something in order to improve the world and show yourself as a truly moral being.

But I think the abolitionists quickly realised that this probably would not work as a widespread appeal to the public. So they started to look around for alternative sources of sugar. And the one that they focused on was what they called East India sugar.

By that, they mainly meant sugar coming from Bengal, which by that time was a British colony. And so they tried to promote this as an alternative. What they didn't do is investigate too closely exactly how sugar was being produced in India, and particularly in Bengal.

It's remarkable to think about more than 100 years of work going into restricting consumption of slave-produced foodstuffs, clothing, and anything else that they might identify, right at the very beginning of the very first human rights campaign in human history there at the end of the 18th century. A key question for us today is can it be effective? What kind of impact did it actually have? How did it help people change both their minds, their behaviours, and hopefully the realities of slavery on the ground?

Yes. And indeed, the early work on the anti-slavery movement tended to suggest that the boycott campaigns were fairly insignificant because they didn't have a direct effect. You couldn't measure the amount in which that they had reduced the consumption of slave produce and actually impacted, therefore, on the ending of slavery.

What I think is missing from that approach is it's too narrow. I think the most important thing about the boycott campaigns was they created the sense of an anti-slavery nation in Britain-- that the households of Britain were uniting to boycott slave-

grown produce. In the process, they were kind of purging the nation of the sin of slavery, the sin of using slave produce.

So I think it really helped-- if you think about anti-slavery movement having two sides, one was all the shenanigans in parliament, all the negotiations around trying to bring in law through legal means to first of all, end the slave trade, then ameliorate slavery, as they called it-- gradual abolition-- and then finally, immediate abolition. There was that side of the campaign.

But really, it was only effective because it was a huge pressure coming from outside parliament, pressure from public opinion. Now, obviously, that most directly manifested itself in hundreds of thousands of people signing anti-slavery petitions and presenting them to parliament. That gave the opportunity for people to debate it in parliament.

But alongside that, there was a sense of creating a whole atmosphere in Britain which was hostile to slavery, and which involved the whole population. And I think that's where the boycott movement was so important because it got people thinking-- really acknowledging that your everyday life in Britain was intimately connected to the lives of enslaved people suffering in the Caribbean.

Today, we know that a lot of things are touched by slavery-- that cotton is still touched by slavery, fruits and vegetables, shrimp and fish, the minerals that go into our laptops and cell phones, other types of minerals like steel and iron, timber. The list-- I could go on for a very long time about all the things that we know come to us through the hands of slaves.

But the key difference today is that while this is a morally enormous problem, in economic terms, the amount of any commodity that's touched by slavery is so minute-- it's such a tiny fraction of the overall in that particular commodity-- that it's economically trivial, even while it's morally crucial. One of the things about contemporary slavery, though, unlike that slavery of the past, is that it tends to be hidden.

So those criminals who are enslaving people to produce whatever commodity we're talking about are very often very difficult to inspect and recognise at the point of origin of any product or commodity. And that, again, throws yet another wrinkle into it.

Now, if there's good news, it's that significant numbers of the people in Western Europe and North America these days, particularly young people, tend not to identify themselves so much as citizens of their countries, but as consumers within their economies. And they actually believe that one other way to deal with moral issues is to consume their way out of it in a proper way-- to vote with their dollars or pounds in the marketplace of ideas or politics.

So for those folk, there is the notion that it doesn't matter if it's only 1% of our cell phone minerals, our mobiles, our laptops are touched by slavery. That's too much. There have been times when there have been calls for boycotts of cocoa, for example.

10 years ago, there was a very large-scale movement in contemporary anti-slavery work to say, we must stop buying any type of West African cocoa because that's where the slavery is. But the difficulty with that, of course, was that there was only about 1% or 2%, at most, of the individual family farmers who might have been using enslaved workers.

So the other farmers are then going to be losing their livelihoods.

Well, had those boycotts gone ahead, it would have meant destitution, starvation, and potentially enslavement of the very farmers who were not using slave labour.

Yes, yes.

So it's a much interesting and more particular kind of specialist knowledge you have to bring to bear if you're going to really address slavery in commodities today and not risk those sorts of boycotts.

And that, of course, makes it harder to involve a broad public. It's easier to have a headline, a simple slogan-- boycott West African cocoa, or boycott West Indian sugar-- than it is to get people involved in the complexities of the minutia of the debate.

So today, we've talked about moral responsibility at a distance and how that works through consumption patterns, both in the past and today. How do we address our moral responsibility to live in a world without slavery, if at all possible, or at least to have an impact on those people who do keep people in slavery through our consumption patterns?

It's an issue that abolitionists, anti-slavery workers, and citizens and consumers have been wrestling with for something like 250 years now. And it's one that we're going to continue to wrestle with, both in this course, and I think in our lives at large.